

# Hiking in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Amber Kraxberger-Linson



*Dr. Taz Tally (with his dog Zip), author of 50 Hikes In Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, will be at the Kenai Refuge Visitor Center on May 27 (Photo credit: Taz Tally).*

What type of trail am I hiking today? Do I need my hiking poles? Skilak Lookout Trail has that steep climb at the end so, yep, I should probably bring them. Regardless of the trail, I'm going to need some bug spray. These are the things that run through my mind when I'm getting ready for a day on the trail. Whether I'm hiking with friends and family or I'm meeting hikers for a Discovery Hike in the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area (SWRA) I try to plan out my day and be prepared. Summer is around the corner and now is the time to think about which trails you might want to visit.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge offers a variety of hiking opportunities that are easily accessible

just minutes from the Kenai-Soldotna area. There are ten trails (Hideout, Upper Kenai River, Lower Kenai River, Burney's, Hidden Creek, Skilak Lookout, Bear Mountain, Vista, Seven Lakes and Marsh Lake) in the SWRA and three (Skyline, Fuller Lakes and Egumen) that are located off the Sterling Highway. These trails range from easy to very strenuous while offering a variety of landscapes and breathtaking views.

If you would like the opportunity to get familiar with Refuge trails, Discovery Hikes led by a ranger in the SWRA will be offered every Friday at 1PM from June 16–August 18. Scheduled trail hikes include Hidden Creek (June 16), Hideout (June 23), Burney's (June 30, July 28), Vista (July 7, August 4), Lower Kenai River (July 14), Seven Lakes (July 21), and Upper Kenai River (August 11). The schedule may be subject to change due to trail conditions. Call the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center at 907-260-2820 to confirm the designated trail of the week.

If you are looking for an excellent and beautifully photographed guide book on hikes all around the Kenai Peninsula then come to the Kenai Refuge Visitor Center on May 27 at 2:00 PM. Taz Tally will give a presentation and sign his book of *50 Hikes in Alaska's Kenai Peninsula*. After the presentation, join Taz for a three-quarter mile hike on the Keen Eye Nature Trail. In addition to being a photographer and an avid four-season outdoor athlete, Dr. Tally is a geologist. The Homer resident has authored numerous books and on-line training courses on digital photography.

On June 4th at 2:00 PM celebrate National Trails Day with a 1 1/2 hour ranger-led hike on Centennial Trail starting from the Visitor Center. Regular Centennial Fitness Walks will occur each Sunday at 2PM led by a park ranger. These moderate-paced guided hikes on the 3-mile Centennial Trail are tailored to adults and designed to move faster than other hikes offered on Headquarters Trails. Please do not bring pets.

When you do head out for the trails, keep these helpful hiking tips in mind. Downhill hikers should yield to hikers who are going uphill. The hikers going uphill are working hard so why not step aside and take a few moments to enjoy the view. Speaking of taking a break, if you decide a little rest is in order move off

the trail to allow others to walk by unobstructed.

A very important component of hiking is practicing good Leave-No-Trace principles including packing out all your trash. Even biodegradable items like banana and orange peels should be carried out. These items take a while to decompose and no one wants to come to the trail's end and see the remains of your lunch sitting there. A banana peel takes 3–4 weeks to decompose while an orange peel can take up to 6 months!

If nature calls while you're hiking, move at least 200 feet off of the trail, away from campsites and water sources. Do not leave toilet tissue above ground. Pack out used tissue or bury your waste and tissue in a "cathole" 6–8 inches deep and 4 inches across. Toilet tissue breaks down faster when exposed to moisture and organic microorganisms. Besides the negative health effects and possible spread of disease associated with human waste, no one likes seeing wads of used toilet paper in their favorite hiking or camping area.

There are multiple benefits to getting out and connecting with Nature through hiking that have been reported in numerous studies: lowered stress levels, higher bone density, and increased fitness. I can personally attest to feeling an immense sense of accomplishment and well-being after completing a hike. It's addicting!

I love hiking the trails of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge because there is always something new to see. Landscape that has been touched by fire comes back to life and wildlife returns to the area. New trees spring up and once mighty trees are taken down by high winds or snowpack. The landscape is always changing and if we take the time to look and visit often, we might just see it.

*Amber Kraxberger-Linson is a Visitor Services Park Ranger for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and a life-long Soldotna resident. Find more information about the Refuge at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*